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ABSTRACT

The general aim of this booklet is to assist those who desire to increase their knowledge and appreciation of Asian cultures and, more specifically, to provide an additional dimension to the Asia Society's Dance Demonstration Program. Dance history, philosophical ideas of religion, accompanying rituals, the relationship of dance to music, and roles and styles of today are briefly described and traced for each of the countries of India, China, Korea, and Japan. The artistic interchange and transmission of dance-form from one culture to another in each country is emphasized. The last section compares Asian and Western dance, focussing on differences in attitudes and performances. (SJM)

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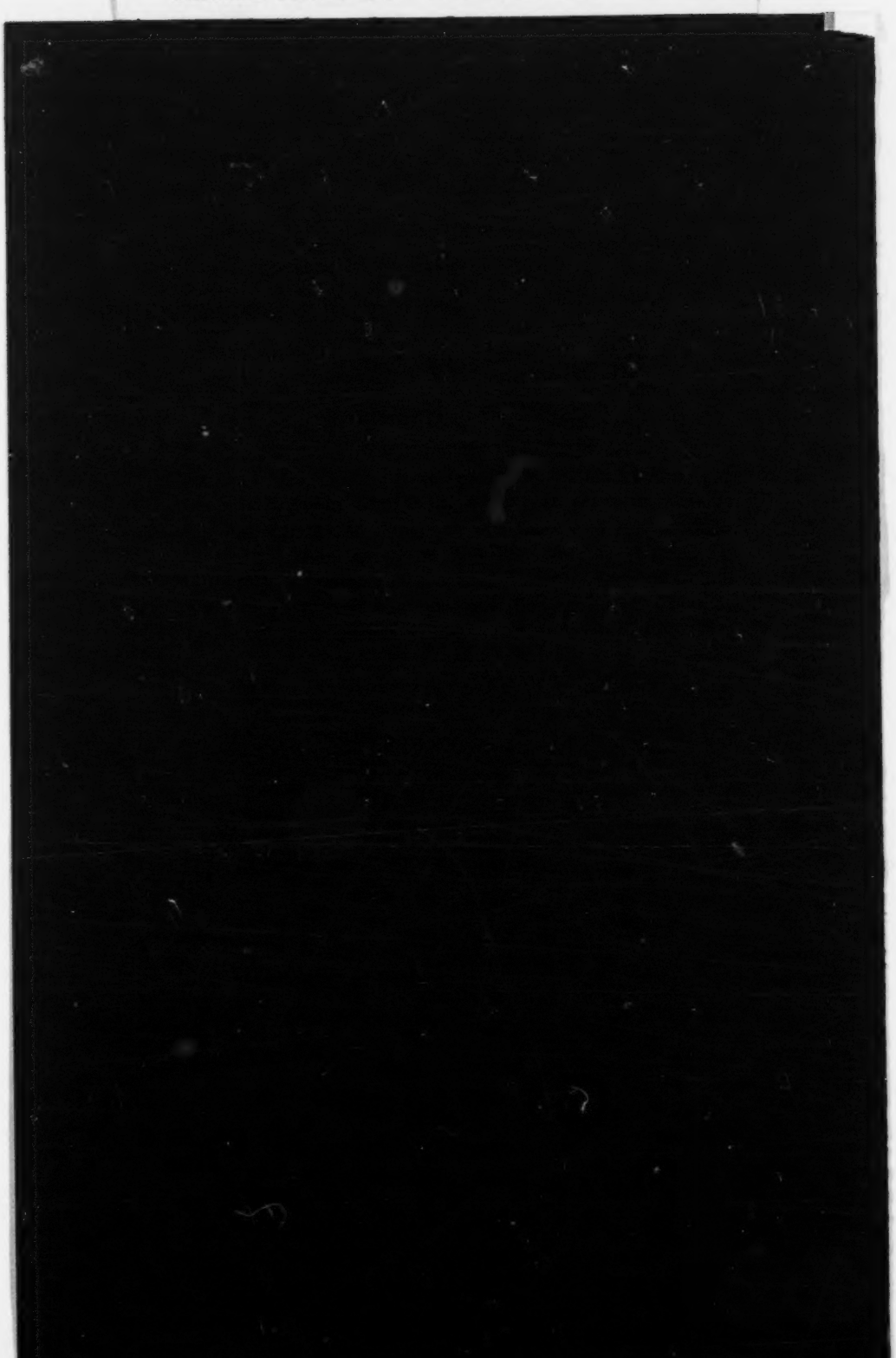

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DANCE OF INDIA · CHINA KOREA · JAPAN

BEATE AND JOSEPH GORDON

THE ASIA SOCIETY
NEW YORK

PREFACE

Dance is found in every culture but is expressed in unique forms. With the hope of assisting those who are trying to increase their knowledge and appreciation of Asian cultures and peoples, the Asia Society is pleased to publish *An Introduction to the Dance of India, China, Korea and Japan.*

This booklet has been written to provide an additional dimension to the Asia Society's "Asian Dance Demonstration Program." The program is directed by Beate Gordon and consists of five "performer packages" depicting the dance of India, China, Korea and Japan.

We are grateful to Faubion Bowers for reading the manuscript and for providing valuable suggestions. Appreciation is also extended to The Asia Foundation for its grant which helped in the preparation of the manuscript. Above all, we are indebted to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Gordon for their interest and scholarship in making possible this publication.

Revised Edition 1965

Authoritative books in English on Asian dance are still few in number. Our authors relied mainly on magazine and monograph materials. In particular, they wish to acknowledge the assistance received from the following sources. (Books available in paperback are preceded by an asterisk; the paperback publisher is listed in parentheses.)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DANCE OF INDIA, CHINA, KOREA AND JAPAN

As in many other cultures, Asian dance is the refined and sophisticated by-product of religious ritual. Buddhism, which originated in India around 500 B.C., spread to China, Korea and Japan over a period of a thousand years, carrying with it the dances which celebrated Buddhist religious festivals.

Indian Buddhist monks, who originally came to China to spread the philosophical ideas of their religion, brought with them musical instruments and dance-forms as well. From China, in turn, this influence (having acquired Confucian ideas) was carried to Korea, around 372 A.D. At the same time, during the first six centuries A.D., Korean culture was itself a powerful influence on China and Japan, exporting its own dance-forms to these countries. Thus there was an artistic interchange among these Asian countries. The transmission of dance-forms from one culture to another introduced changes in them. The philosophies, the accompanying ritual, and the role and style prescribed for dance became a synthesis of foreign and native elements, both religious and artistic. In China, for example, because religion was less concerned with the supernatural than it was in India, the dance is less concerned with gods and legends and more with history, heroes, and man's ethical behavior.

In ancient Asia, where drama was a part of religious observance, the dance was used to instruct as well as to entertain. It was accompanied by the spoken word and by song, and was used to illustrate and clarify the meaning of the words.

Dance in India

According to legend, Brahma, a Hindu god, devised dance and drama as a pastime for celestial beings. He taught a sage named Bharata all he knew. For more than a thousand years, the dance system (*sastra*) which Bharata subsequently created was transmitted through the spoken word until, in the fourth century A.D., it was recorded in writing. The system gives in great detail descriptions not only of movements and facial expression but costume and makeup as well.

According to legend again, the first great dancer was Siva who, with Brahma and Vishnu, forms the trinity worshipped by Hindus. Therefore much of Indian dance concerns itself with Siva and incidents in his life. Indian dance has also borrowed many themes from two epic poems, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* (written about 1,500 years ago). These two poems tell of the adventures of gods and mortals, of supernatural animals and men, and of good and evil actions.

From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, Muslim invasions of India stifled the development of Hindu artistic expression; the followers of Muhammad considered the depiction of God as blasphemy. Also during this time, Hindu religious concepts changed; a cult arose which believed that Vishnu—incarnate as Krishna, the cow-herder—was the most powerful

deity. A central theme of Hindu worship and literature became romantic love. In the dance, plots centered on stories concerning Krishna's flirtation with the milkmaids and particularly with Radha, his favorite.

Today there are four main schools of Indian dance: Bharata Natyam and Kathakali (both south Indian), Kathak and Manipuri (north Indian). Bharata Natyam, with its center in Madras, originally was danced by men but for the last several centuries, it has been performed by women—the *devadasis* (temple dancers). In more recent years, it has been taken up again by men as well as women. Bharata Natyam is a dance which combines movements of the body, eyes, neck and hands with vigorous and rapid foot movements. The complex rhythms beaten by the feet are emphasized by small bells attached to the ankles.

Bharata Natyam (as in all schools of Indian dance) is based mainly on nine "emotions" (*rasa*): heroism, fear, love, humor, fury, pathos, wonder, disgust and tranquility. These emotions are shown by body, hand and finger movements, and by facial expression. Another important basis of Indian dance is "mood" (*bhava*)—pleasure, delight, and so forth. To express the "moods" and "emotions," a special gesture-language (*mudras*) also has been developed. These gestures can express ideas, objects, animals, gods, rivers, mountains and so on. All dances are based on various prescribed rhythms (*tala*).

An important part of a Bharata Natyam performance is a series of songs (*padams*) which are always deeply religious. The dancer either sings the words in unison with the accompanist or forms them silently with her lips while using her hands in the gesture-language. Her facial expressions also help to interpret the meaning of the song.

Kathakali, the dance-form of the west coast of south India, originally was performed by men only. Nowadays women dance this style also, although it is still predominantly a male dance. Young boys often take the role of women. The makeup, which may take as much as four hours to apply for characters such as demons and monkeys, is extremely intricate and grotesque. The normal appearance of the dancer is completely disguised. In contrast to the elaborate and unique makeup, the costumes are quite uniform. They consist of long-sleeved jackets and huge billowing skirts, and large crowns and halos for the head. The dancing is accompanied by very loud drumming. Kathakali dance is an energetic and bombastic art, with great emphasis on lively pantomime.

Kathak, the third school of Indian dance, comes from north India. Because this part of India was conquered by the Muslims, the Moghuls had their court there and Islamic influences were greatest in this area. The Muslims tried to suppress religious-motivated dance-forms because they are opposed to the representation of God by man. Therefore Indian dance had to change from a very religious to a more secular expression. It also assimilated Muslim costumes and choreography. The basis of Kathak dancing is rhythm expressed by foot beat. The movements of the body and arms are limited, but there are very exciting whirling turns. The tapping of the feet becomes faster and faster to the accompaniment of the drums. Fa-

cial expressions are more realistic than in Bharata Natyam and Kathakali. Either women or men perform Kathak.

The fourth school of Indian dance is Manipuri, from northeast India. There are dances in this school which are vigorous and acrobatic (the tribal dances such as the one which depicts a betrothal in which the movements of butterflies, monkeys, etc., are imitated), and then there are some which are characterized by graceful turning and swaying movements. The Manipuris have created dance-operas called Ras Lilas in which Krishna legends are performed. It is common for a whole village to dance in prayer for protection of the gods.

The stage for all Indian dance is quite simple. Originally dances were performed in temples, at the court, or out-of-doors with oil lamps providing illumination; a roof held up by poles, or a curtain held by two attendants (depending on the school of dance) is all that is required today.

Dance in China

Buddhism arrived in China from India about two thousand years ago. A Chinese priest who made a tour of India in the seventh century brought back to China stories on which he based operas, one of which concerned the antics of a monkey-king, a character from the Indian *Ramayana*. Although there are traces of Indian influence on China, the Chinese developed their own indigenous art forms—the most outstanding being Chinese opera. Unlike India's dance and drama, Chinese opera is much less concerned with religion and is more interested in human beings, actual events, national history and ethics. Dance is only a small part of the Chinese opera and does not have the importance Indian dance has in Indian theater.

The Chinese opera, as it is known today, originated between the eighth and tenth centuries, when one of the emperors established an institute of dramatics which was called the "Pear Garden." To this day, Chinese actors are sometimes called "people of the Pear Garden."

Originally, Chinese opera served as entertainment for the court and its nobles, but there were also public performances. The nobles patronized the artists and many princely palaces had their own troupes of performers.

Chinese opera demands much of an actor. He must be able to sing in a falsetto voice, declaim, dance, and perform elaborate mimes as well as gymnastics, acrobatics, and juggling. The plots are of two kinds: military or civil. The former are heroic, with brave generals going to battle and wise emperors and loyal government officials struggling against the enemy. The civil plays relate stories of faithful wives, filial piety and other Confucian ideals, or they may present some simple but charming episode. "Picking up the Jade Bracelet," for example, depicts a flirtation between a coy maiden and a young nobleman. Almost all stories derive from historical events or from classical novels.

When dance appears in Chinese opera, it is almost incidental; when the emperor leaves for battle, the queen performs a sword dance in farewell. In the opera Yang Kuei Fei, this famous beauty of Chinese history dances

drunkenly when she fears that the emperor no longer loves her.

The Chinese opera stage is bare except for a multi-colored backdrop. The only props are chairs or a table, to be used for various purposes such as thrones, obstacles, and so on. Elaborate and colorful costumes, headdresses and makeup compensate for the relatively bare stage.

Before the eighteenth century, both men and women appeared on the stage. After that time, men took over female roles and women were barred from the stage for reasons of propriety. Since 1924, however, women have again appeared in the theater. Traditionally, the most famous opera companies have been in Peking.

As to folk dance in China, there are several from various provinces—a stick dance, a butterfly chase dance, a skipping dance—but apparently few have been preserved.

Dance in Korea

Buddhism reached Korea in the fourth century A.D. from China and brought with it religious dances performed during Buddhist rituals. These dances had no specific religious meaning but were used to attract attention to the Buddhist ceremony. A typical dance of this type consists of a young monk carrying a drum stick in each hand and beating a drum. The dance movements consist primarily of waving the long sleeves of his garment.

In addition to Buddhist influence, Confucian philosophy spread to Korea in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Confucian-inspired dance was rather simple, with little movement but with rather elaborate staging in the sense that as many as sixty-four dancers, carrying flutes, shields and axes, were used.

Court dances performed for the entertainment of the ruler had both ancient Korean and Chinese origins. These dances were, as in India and China, performed as part of an entertainment including songs and poetic recitations. One of the most famous of court dances was composed by a king in the eighteenth century. It is called the Nightingale Dance (Chun-Aeng-Jon). The dancer wears a yellow robe and a delicate trembling headgear in the form of a crown. The dance is slow and very graceful, with elegant movements of the arms and feet. "Choyong" dance which dates from before the tenth century uses five dancers, all clad in different colored costumes—red, blue, yellow, white, and black—symbolizing the east, the west, the south, the north, and the center of the universe. The dancers all wear similar masks and crowns. This dance consists of stately solo interludes and duets, and ends with a whirling group dance.

In folk dance, the Korean peasant had a freedom of expression and creativity not found in the formal religious and court dances. The folk dance took in elements of the dances from the court and from Buddhist ritual and adapted them to its own needs. An example is the Monk's Dance (Soong Mu). A dancer wearing a monk's robe rises as if awakening from meditation. He then raises and lowers his long sleeves as if his faith were shaken. He starts vigorously beating a drum. The music stops; the dancer

seems released and free.

The primary impression one gets from Korean court and religious dance is a feeling of elegance. The costumes are in the most tasteful color combinations and the dance movements are graceful and restrained. The staging is simple—a painting of a temple may serve as a backdrop, or there may be some large lotus flowers on stage from which young girls emerge. In the Chinese-influenced dances, the performers may use props such as bamboo poles with little flags, but these are used in a restrained fashion. In contrast, folk dances are vigorous and display aspects of virtuosity. In the Farmers' Festival Dance, for example, a male dancer wears a hat from which long ribbons sprout and which he twirls around by moving his head faster and faster in a circular motion.

The Korean repertoire is not without humorous dances. The Old Man's Dance in which the protagonist, recalling his youth, has too much to drink and staggers about hilariously, is a great favorite but is not typical.

Dance in Japan

Dance in Japan is over 1,500 years old and these traditional forms have been preserved intact. The oldest Japanese dance is Bugaku, a stately, slow court dance. It was imported from India through Tibet, and from China through Korea. It is only since World War II that the court dancers have been seen outside the Imperial Palace. Except for a few performances at shrines, Bugaku has been a dance-form preserved strictly for the entertainment of the royal court. It employs very beautiful costumes, occasional masks and props, and an elaborate orchestra.

In the fifteenth century, Noh drama was developed for the pleasure of the aristocracy. It is a very slow-moving theater form which includes dance at its climax. The dance is accompanied by recitation and chanting and by an orchestra made up of stringed and percussion instruments. Certain gestures have symbolic meanings. Masks, as well as elaborate costumes, are used by the actor-dancers. Noh dramas are interspersed with Kyogen, usually short satirical plays which are quite realistic and which have comic or serious dance sequences depending upon the nature of the Kyogen. Some of these plays have an almost slapstick quality; for Westerners, it is probably the most understandable of Asian theater forms. The stage for Noh and Kyogen is a simple wooden platform with a wooden ramp leading to the stage from which the actor-dancers make their entrances. A backdrop showing a single gnarled pine tree completes the stage setting.

Kabuki, which is a synthesis of the arts of drama, dance, music and singing, dates from the seventeenth century. In Kabuki, dance may be used as the actor recites an event that has taken place and acts out the story. A typical Japanese story, for example, is related in the famous Kabuki drama, Musume Dojoji, in which a beautiful maiden in love with a priest changes into a snake in order to gain revenge for her unrequited love. Sometimes an actor may make an entrance or exit in dance; on occasion, he will ask his attendants to dance for him. Any pretext to include dance

is used. The costumes of Kabuki are opulent, and makeup and stage scenery are elaborate, giving a very dramatic and colorful effect.

Noh and Kabuki are danced and acted by men who perform both female and male roles. However, dance excerpts taken from the Kabuki or Noh theater are danced on the popular stage currently either by men or women.

Geisha dances are perhaps the most famous of Japanese dance-forms. Besides their own classical dances which they perform in geisha houses for small private gatherings, geisha also perform on a grand scale in professional theaters. For these occasions they borrow Kabuki dances. They perform both women's and men's dances, the latter being mostly about warriors and the former having romantic love as the theme. The dance is stately and slow-moving, again in beautiful costume and makeup. Control is the single most important item in this as in all other forms of Japanese dance.

Folk dance in Japan abounds. There are rice-planting dances, fishermen's dances, lion dances, and temple dances such as the Bon Odori when the whole countryside joins in dancing in celebration of a religious holiday.

Asian and Western Dance Compared

When looking at Asian dance, the Western viewer must bear in mind certain differences in attitude and performance as contrasted to Western dance. First, the Western dancer aspires to upward movement, "elevation," to become ethereal. The epitome of this is, of course, ballet in which the toe shoes help physically to get the dancer off the ground. This is in marked contrast to Asian dance which, while it does embrace jumps and acrobatics (especially in Chinese opera), is not "lifting." Foot movements are, rather, downward, earthbound. Unlike virtuoso Western leaps and jumps, most of Eastern dance is stately and slow-moving. There is a great deal of very deliberate posturing and highly formalistic mime. Most Asian dances depict historical tales or legends as such, or as part of some elaborate play or opera.

Just as the subjects of Asian dance are very much in the "representational" school, so the expressions and gestures remain realistic and expressionist even though they may be highly stylized. Individual parts of the body—shoulders, eyes, eyebrows, neck, fingers and hands—are used much more than in Western dance where the body is used more as a unit for expressing love, anger, and happiness. Properties, including fans, swords, cymbals, drums and scarves, are also used more in Asian dances than in the West. Costumes, jewelry, headdress, wigs and makeup are much more elaborate. The costumes themselves are works of art, embroidered and sewn by generations of costume-makers. They cannot be so easily replaced as Western costumes, not only because of their elaborateness but also because of their cost which reaches into thousands of dollars. The costumes, makeup and choreography are highly traditional. Dances have been preserved intact for centuries and very little improvisation is permitted in the ritual and ceremonial dances. In Japan, China, India and Korea, certain

famous dance schools have continued—uninterrupted and virtually unchanged for generations—to teach their pupils the dances handed down from father to son. A diligent pupil may be permitted to adopt the name of the school where he was trained so that he may continue the tradition. The formality of this whole system encourages a paternalistic teacher-student relationship—one in which the teacher is especially esteemed, is always consulted regarding the plans of the aspiring dancer, and is financially rewarded even after the young artist has left the school and is performing on his own. This relationship applies particularly in Japan.

The teaching methods in Asia are also quite different from those found in the West. Here, one is taught techniques and patterns first before learning complete dances. In most oriental countries, techniques are not taught separately; entire dances are taught. The format of a particular dance may vary slightly from teacher to teacher, but within a given school the dance pattern will have been unchanged for generations. Therefore there is no such thing as free choreography. Traditional steps and patterns are to be mastered, not improved upon or adapted to one's own style or interpretation.

Although Western influence in the Far East has had its effects on Asian dance since the nineteenth century, the results of that influence have not always been felicitous. The new choreography appearing, with some diffidence, in the various countries of Asia is based on a mixture of Western and Asian dance and tends to do a disservice to both sources. Uncommonly great artistry is needed to make an aesthetic amalgamation of such diverse traditions and techniques. The union of Korean, Japanese, Chinese or Indian dance was, for obvious reasons, much more readily and satisfactorily achieved. Furthermore, the impact of the West on Asia has been so strong culturally that in a country such as Japan, for example, Western music, dance, and art have all but submerged the traditional arts. The Japanese art forms, ironically, were neglected until the Occupation of Japan when American interest in Japanese culture helped to revive them. It is only recently that Japan has produced dancers and musicians who feel that they can draw upon their own heritage and create something contemporary, based on this heritage and perhaps influenced by the West, but not imitative of Western culture. Japan is an outstanding example of an Asian country which was not a colony but was eager to adopt and modify art forms from the West.

The Asia Society has developed a program of Asian dance performances designed for elementary and high school students. These programs are intended to introduce young Americans to Asian culture and to stimulate their interest by focusing on the similarities and differences which exist in the dances of Japan, China, Korea, and India. For instance, the use of the sword in China to depict attack and defense is similar to its use in Japan. In Korea, however, the sword is small and stylized and is used purely for its decorative effect and for the jangling noise it makes. The comparison of shoulder movements in Chinese, Indian, and Korean dance shows the strong cultural relationship among these countries; in all three,

moving the shoulders up and down means happiness. The art of writing as depicted in dances of China, Japan, and Korea is almost identical. Also in all these countries, male roles can be danced by females and female roles by men. Although the musical accompaniment is somewhat different in each country, some of the instruments are similar and there is a certain repetition and steady rhythm in all which casts a near-hypnotic spell.

The careful observer will notice not only similarities in the dances of Asian countries but similarities between those of Asian and European countries. The Chinese dancer does small side-steps almost identical to the bourree of Western ballet; the Kathak dancer performs fast foot movements similar to Spanish dance; the Manipuri tribal dance resembles an American Indian dance, and some of the Chinese pantomime (threading a needle, for example) could easily have been choreographed by a Western mime.

While it is true everywhere that man is unique, it is also true at the same time that he is similar to his fellow humans. This generalization is certainly illustrated by any examination of dance in Asia and the West.

Western viewers of Asian dance must keep in mind that the attitude of an Asian audience has certain basic differences from that of its Western counterpart. Westerners who view performances in an Asian country are almost invariably overcome by the tedium of a five or ten-hour presentation, far in excess of anything to be seen in New York or Paris. They must, if they are to feel more at home with Eastern productions, keep in mind that to the Asian, the "theater" presents an occasion for socializing. He brings his small children, his lunch, he drinks tea and goes in and out during a performance. In most cases, he knows the presentation so well that he is prepared to focus his attention on those portions particularly dear to him. Time, so carefully rationed in the West, is not an over-riding consideration in the very social atmosphere of oriental spectacle. Formality, so highly developed in Asia, is left behind by the Chinese or Japanese when he is being entertained, even while the performance itself is so formalized as to deserve the name of "ritual." This is in sharp contrast to the approach of Western audiences. The theatergoer in London or New York is by no means casual. He comes at a prescribed time, sits quietly and attentively (one assumes) through a performance of much shorter duration than anything in Asia, and goes out only at a scheduled intermission. Formality here is left to the *audience*, with the performers having far greater latitude in performing or planning their presentations.

These differences in attitude present obvious difficulties in introducing Asian art forms to the West. Clearly, Asian performance times must be reduced, programs carefully paced, and some scenery and lighting added—all without impairing the authenticity of the production. Although such attempts are already under way to make Asian style performances more palatable to Westerners, it will be necessary for the latter to contribute toward that end by remembering to approach such works with a less formal, tempo-conscious air, and with a readiness to "relax and enjoy it."